

# Media gets failing grade on Ipperwash

By Paul Barnsley  
Windspeaker Staff Writer

TORONTO

Ryerson University journalism Professor John Miller surprised himself when he began to look at how the mainstream media reported the occupation of Ipperwash Provincial Park in 1995.

"The language in the report I deliberately toned down because I wanted people to focus on what I found. But I'll tell you that I was quite shocked by what I found," he said. "And I had to keep pinching myself and saying, 'That was 10 years ago.' But I've done a lot of studies about media coverage about black people, Vietnamese people and the connection with crime and I know now from looking at Ipperwash that the stereotyping and unconscious racism towards Native people in this country is worse than towards any other group. It's pretty bad towards any other group, but towards Native people it's dreadful."

Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto (ALST) is an agency that advocates for, and assists, urban Aboriginal people in Canada's largest city. ALST has standing at the Ipperwash inquiry and was able to get funding from the inquiry commission for a study of media coverage. Miller was contacted to do the research. He looked at 19 daily newspapers, *Maclean's* magazine and four wire services. His 76-page report is available at the inquiry's Web site—[ipperwashinquiry.ca](http://ipperwashinquiry.ca)

"I wanted to look at some of the coverage from before the park but I also wanted to look at it for about a month afterwards, where there was evidence available that the Stoney Pointers were telling the truth. That they had a right to be there and they weren't armed. But almost nobody picked up on it," he said.

He concludes in the report that "the Ipperwash crisis was not journalism's finest hour."

By doing a statistical analysis of what sources reporters used and what lens was used to look at the information, Miller came to the conclusion that a vast majority of the work was based on stereotypes. And those stereotypes got in the way of what should be every journalist's most sacred goal: the search for the truth.

Most reporters, he concluded, "framed" the story long before they ever arrived at the scene.

Miller was asked to define what he meant by framing.

"It just means the context of the story, how it's portrayed. For instance, one of the frames was 'Natives as troublemakers.' How did I determine that? I determined that by, if the story was cast as a police story rather than a land claim story. It was, you know, the Stoney Pointers were up to

something that required the police presence and build up, police action," he replied. "So they were someplace they weren't supposed to be and were causing trouble. If, however, it said they were there out of frustration that their land claims hadn't been settled then it was framed as a land claim story. Or if it was emphasized that they were rebels or a splinter group from the main band then they were again cast in a negative light and not even authorized by the their own band."

And the more senior reporters—those who are allowed to express their personal opinions in columns—seemed to be the worst offenders.

"The opinion articles, especially, were written purely on the basis of stereotypes. Almost as if the columnists—and some of them were very prominent columnists—say, 'We know how people feel about this. This is just another instance of Oka-like terrorism. They leapt to that conclusion without any evidence,' Miller said. "The wonder to me is why is this stuff published. Who made the judgement to put this tripe in the paper? Is there no standard of accuracy for columns? The only reason they'd put this in the paper is they say, 'Well, we all know about Native people and this is just more of the same.'"

Non-journalists fared much better than the columnists.

"When the letters to the editor are separated out from the opinion columns and editorials, they're much more supportive and more reasonable towards what happened at Ipperwash," he said. "There were more of the letters that were at least expressing doubt that the police were right. They say, 'We didn't see any evidence of guns. How can you write this stuff when the facts are still in dispute.'"

All of this reinforces Miller's belief that cross-cultural training is a very important part of journalism training. He has been involved in such a course at Ryerson for several years.

"It's the only course of its kind in Canada. It draws somewhat from similar courses in the United States where there's much more consciousness that this needs to be addressed. You know, avoiding the journalistic impulse to make up your mind what the story is as soon as you get the assignment is something that takes practice because we all do," he said. "We all immediately start framing the story and deciding who we're going to talk to. But when you don't know the culture, you have to withhold judgement for a little bit until you do some initial investigating."

# Censured writer draws fire

By Paul Barnsley  
Windspeaker Staff Writer

CALGARY

A racist comment in a Ric Dolphin story in the *Western Standard* about the leadership race for the ruling Alberta Conservative Party has caused his employer some headaches.

Aboriginal community leaders in Edmonton, who call themselves the Aboriginal Human Rights Commission, called a press conference at City Hall on Feb. 15. They were outraged by the following reference to Alberta Premier Ralph Klein's Metis wife in the story:

"Colleen's influence is seen as destructive and her motives less than altruistic. 'Once she stops being the premier's wife, she goes back to being just another Indian,' says one of Klein's fishing buddies, in an unkind reference to Colleen's Native heritage. 'Colleen likes being picked up in a car with security and being driven to her next function,' says a longtime campaign manager close to both Kleins."

The quotes, as has been the practice of Dolphin in the past when passing on derisive comments about Aboriginal people, are from unnamed sources.

Metis Nation of Alberta Vice-president Trevor Gladue wants Dolphin to prove he didn't just make them up by naming the sources.

Muriel Stanley Venne, president of the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, said a human rights complaint is being considered.

This is not the first time Dolphin has angered Aboriginal people with his writing. He was censured by the Alberta Press Council in 2003. Within hours of that decision came the news that he was no longer employed by the *Calgary Herald*. Shortly thereafter, he found employment at the *Western Standard*.

Publisher Ezra Levant, a lawyer by training who is also a former communications person for the Canadian Alliance, said he was delighted to hear from *Windspeaker* when we contacted him on Feb. 22.

"You're my most important call today," he said. "People think we are hostile to Aboriginal people and that bothers me so much because it is so untrue."

He said he was surprised by the reaction to the Dolphin article.

"We didn't get why people are shooting the messenger. And then we realized they're not shooting the *Western Standard* so much as they have an outstanding beef with Ric that's to do with what he did at another paper."

He admitted the racial aspect of the unattributed comment got past both himself and his editor.

"Our magazine was surprised by that because we read it as a spicy political story, an inside



Muriel Stanley Venne, president of the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, said a human rights complaint is being considered against Dolphin and the Calgary-based *Western Standard* magazine.

baseball leadership story. That's how we read it. That's how I read it and I used to be a poll captain for Ralph Klein. And so when we saw the reaction ... Kevin Libin, our editor who was senior writer with *Canadian Business* in Toronto until he came west two years ago, this whole back story was news to him," Levant said. He defended the article as an important news story about the ambitions of former Alberta cabinet minister Jim Dinning who is waiting for Klein to move on so he can run for the job.

"When I think of Ric Dolphin I think of a spicy guy who writes with a sarcastic humor. So when I read that story that's what jumped out at me. I thought, 'Wow, this is spicy story of scheming to replace Ralph Klein' and the racial tone was not the central item of the piece. In the context of past disagreements with other newspapers of which Ric wrote, I can see how people would make that the central focus."

But he insisted his track record in dealing with the Aboriginal community shows that his publication is not anti-Aboriginal.

"I would say in our defence, two things: We know who said these words and he's a friend of the premier's and he actually said it and we think it's newsworthy and we have more or less identified him. You know, within a handful of people," he said. "Second, we believe we are the most pro-Aboriginal general interest newsmagazine in the country."

He said it was very frustrating to see "all our good work with dozens of bands and probably 50

companies was all of a sudden being attacked by folks who were really blaming us for a pre-existing fight they had with one of our writers."

Levant said he "wouldn't overstate" the backlash that his publication has faced as a result of this controversy, and another one.

The two-year-old, bi-monthly



Ezra Levant

conservative newsmagazine based in Calgary decided to publish the controversial Danish cartoons that depict the prophet Muhammad in ways that enraged Muslims all over the world and led to violent and deadly

protests.

Newsstands and other retail outlets pulled the magazine from their shelves because of the publication of the cartoons. Air Canada has also decided not to carry it.

Out of a press run of 40,000 copies every two weeks, he said only a couple of hundred copies are sold to Chapters, McNally Robinson and Air Canada.

"Both of those companies, by the way, are coming back on next issue. They just thought, 'Hmm, this one's a little spicy. We'll take a break,' he said. "Air Canada, at my initiative, I called up Air Canada about a week before we went to press just to give them the head's up we're doing the cartoons in a tasteful, unprovocative way. 'Let's talk about what we might do just to make them easier for you.'"

While the magazine received 7,000 e-mails, 2,000 phone calls and 500 faxes this month, the response to the Dolphin article was "literally one per cent of the fury." (see Publisher page 10.)

Copyright of *Windspeaker* is the property of Aboriginal Multi-Media Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.